



**VILLAGE
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

Called to Worship

SCRIPTURE:
Psalm 34:
1-10

April 7, 2024 — Sermon by Rev. Alice Whitson

One of my favorite places in the world is the J. Moseley Tabernacle at Ferncliff Camp and Conference Center outside Little Rock, Arkansas. My wife, Julianna, grew up going to Ferncliff Camp and ever since I've known her, Ferncliff has been an important part of my life as well. Every summer she and I go for a week to serve as chaplains for the summer camp. We have the privilege and joy to meet and spend the week with 25 or so counselors and staff and 100 or more campers. It is an absolute blast and the highlight of our year.

So, this past summer when Julianna and I were there, we were standing in the J. Moseley Tabernacle—affectionately called the JMO—an open-air pavilion of sorts, with open sides, concrete floors, and a beautiful wooden roof overhead. Julianna and I were in a last-minute huddle planning worship for the kiddos who were eating their snacks. The best and worst thing about camp is that you rarely have time to plan. Everything is instinct and a willingness to go with the nudges of the Holy Spirit. We were planning worship, what songs we would sing, what message we would give. And we were both sort of freaked out. This thing, leading worship at camp, that we both knew ourselves to be called to and honestly good at, suddenly seemed completely foreign to us. We had totally lost our confidence.

This was a Monday night, and Sunday night, the night before, just about an hour after all the kids arrived at camp, a huge thunderstorm blew through camp. It was loud, there was torrential rain, the sky was dark, the lighting was unpredictable and jarring. For many of these kids, and counselors, they were not used to being away from home, especially in such a turbulent storm, and were understandably shaken. And if you remember, Little Rock was very much still recovering last summer from a terrible

tornado that many of these kids had lived through. This always unsettling thing—a thunderstorm while you're away at a camp—also had this added layer of recent trauma for these kids, many of whom had lost houses and were still recovering. So, needless to say, it was a weird night and no one was calm. When it came time for Julianna and I to lead vespers that night it, of course, had to be inside, which is always a bummer because every noise is magnified, everyone immediately feels claustrophobic, too hot, too sticky, and just waiting for it to be over, which is not the vibe the summer chaplains are trying to cultivate in worship. It was a rough evening vespers. Julianna and I never found a rhythm. Everything the kids were feeling that made it hard for them to sit still, we were feeling too, making it hard for us to think of something worthwhile to say. It was ultimately sort of a failed worship experience and we pivoted to snacks pretty quickly. So, here we were, Monday night, standing in the JMO, trying to psych ourselves up to lead worship again, with this memory of it going so poorly in our heads.

As the sun was starting to set, the kids came and sat down around us, worn out from a beautiful and perfect camp day. The weather was amazing, the kids were getting to know each other, they were talking and laughing. That beautiful camp thing was happening where exhaustion mixes with shared experience to form these tight little families. The nervous, anxious noise of the first evening had given way to the warm, happy noise of new friends, new stories, and belonging.

I looked over my shoulder, and just about 100 feet away from me, in a little clearing between us and the lake, was a family of deer. A doe and two young ones. Here was the Holy Spirit come to talk to us. I went back to the kids and I whispered, "Hey, there is the sweetest family of deer over here. Come see, but you

need to be quiet!”

They got up so excitedly, wide eyed, and watched the deer. All 100 of them, from 8 year olds to 18 year olds, stood perfectly quiet. For the first time, we, I, could hear the leaves in the trees, I could feel the wind on my face, I saw not only the deer but the lake beyond them. I felt that feeling you get when you're in your favorite place, doing your favorite thing. I felt overwhelmed with joy. We stood there in silence together for probably more than a minute. I had my guitar and the chords for “10,000 Reasons” came to me. I began to play and the kids joined me in singing, “Bless the Lord, O my soul. O my soul. Worship your holy name. Sing like never before, O my soul, I'll worship your holy name.” The kids made their way back inside and sat on the cool concrete. We sang some more, we read scripture, and then we talked about what it said and what we thought it meant, how it might apply to our week and then to our lives beyond. We prayed. We passed the peace.

Those deer called us into worship. “O magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt God's name together,” the psalmist says.

We are beginning a new sermon series this morning called, “The Ways We Worship” where we will slow down and take a look at each of the elements of a typical worship service. We know the big players in worship: the music, the scripture, the message, the peace, the benediction. But this morning, our task is to consider the humble Call to Worship. It's often one of the first elements of the worship service and its function is to simply remind us, or through call and response, invite us, to remind ourselves, some truth about God that reorients us into a posture of worship. That settles our minds and our hearts and allows us to be open to receiving God's reassurances and challenges for our lives.

In our scripture for this morning, Psalm 34, the psalmist shows us this formula (of sorts) for worship. The psalmist tells us that worship is never something we can engage in on our own. “Magnify the Lord with me” the psalmist says. Whether it is the beauty of a mountaintop that calls us into worship, the stillness of the morning, the smile of a newborn, the laugh of an old friend, worship is always, always our response to God's goodness and faithfulness in our lives. It is our response empowered by the

Holy Spirit, and it is always communal. When we are called to worship, we tap into the constant worship of creation, we join our song to the continual praise of God's Spirit all around us.

The psalmist reminds us, also, that our praise and worship is not a matter of when, but how. The psalmist answers the question, “When should we praise God?” with a resounding “Always.” “I will bless the Lord at all times, God's praise shall continually be in my mouth,” the psalmist says. So, clearly “when” is not an interesting question for the author of this psalm. The question of “how” seems to matter much more. And the answers to “How should we worship? And what should our praise look like?” comes in two parts.

First, this psalm shows us that we worship God by turning our praise into a beautiful thing. “Look to God, and be radiant,” says the psalmist. Since the dawn of time, our adoration of the divine has inspired humanity's most beautiful works. Songs, hymns, poetry, paintings, dance. Something about God's beauty inspires our own—requires our own—in response.

Now, I am not much of a singer, and I've never been able to draw or paint very well. Poetry has always been a nonstarter for me and I have never even seriously attempted dance. But, whenever I am called to worship, whenever I am overwhelmed by God's goodness in my life and inspired to respond in praise, I find that whatever I am doing, I sit up a little straighter, I show a little more kindness, I put in a little more effort, I double check, I tidy up, I give the best of myself to whatever I am doing, because I am doing it for, and in light of, God and God's steadfast love. I think God finds that beautiful. Just like here at Village, our deacons and ushers and greeters, their smiles, their handshakes, their attention to detail, their commitment to their task, is beautiful to God. So, that's first. The psalm shows us that our praise of God, when we are called into worship, our worship should be beautiful.

Second, the psalm instructs us to make special effort to let our praise for God's goodness be heard by those around us—specifically those who are in need of hope. The psalmist instructs us to make our boast in the Lord; and to let the humble hear and be glad. This word translated ‘humble,’ here, could

also be translated as the poor, the afflicted, the weak, the suffering. There are places in this world, and there are times in all of our lives, when we need to hear the stories of others. When we need to hear the praise of others. When we need to gather with others and let their worship carry us until worship genuinely comes from our hearts again, like we know it will, in time. Our praise is not just for us, and it is not just for God, the psalmist reminds us; it is also an inspiration, a hope, an anchor of truth for our neighbors and those around us who need it most.

So, here is our formula: God's goodness and faithfulness call us to join into the ongoing praise of creation, and not only to praise but to praise with beauty and devotion, with the very best of ourselves. This praise is not just for us, and not even just for God, but we should make special effort to tell our stories to those around us—especially those who

need to hear it most.

And what is the promised result of this praise? "O taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are those who take refuge in God." Joy. Joy is the result.

Joy. That elusive, all-consuming desire of ours, is not so elusive after all. Joy is not elusive on the mountaintop, or in a wide, quiet forest, or on the first warm day of spring or the first crisp day of fall. Joy is not elusive when the Morning Stars come and sing for us, or when the Village Choir sings as beautifully and as powerfully as they did last Sunday. Joy is so not elusive when we praise. Joy is not elusive when we gather. Joy is as constant as the worship echoing through creation since the very beginning of time. O taste and see that the Lord is good. Come let us exalt God's name together.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.